

Agricultural Resources Committee

Minutes October 23, 2006, 10:30am-12:30pm
Lopez Grange Hall

ARC Members Present: Peter Corning; Todd Goldsmith; Bruce Gregory; Eliza Habegger; Sara Jones; Julie Miller; Rebecca Moore; Kathryn Quackenbush; Christina Dahl-Sesby; Tom Schultz.

ARC Members Absent: Jane Burton-Bell; Ralph Hahn; Jim Lawrence; Rena Patty; John Steward; Madden Surbaugh; Mark Tompkins, Ken Akopiantz.

Guests Present: Kathryn Thomas-Akopiantz; Jana Marks, Friends of the San Juans; Candice Jagel, WSU Extension; Jason Robertson, Barney & Worth Inc.; Shireene Hale, Senior Planner, SJC Community Development and Planning Department; Richard Civile, SJI Grange Legislative Rep; Holly Kent; Scott Meyers, Sweet Grass Farm, Lopez.

ARC Staff Present: Sandy Strehlou.

Public Comment

- **Scott Meyers, Sweet Grass Farm, Lopez:** Addressed the Critical Areas Ordinance (CAO) and his concern that the final ordinance not contain formula regulations that don't apply to the resources characteristics specific to San Juan County, and the island microcosms present here.

Welcome New ARC Members

ARC Vice-Chair, Todd Goldsmith, introduced San Juan County Conservation District Manager, Ron Zee, and farmer/producer, Christina Dahl-Sesby. Zee and Dahl-Sesby are new ARC members appointed to fill positions vacated by Bill Hamilton and Susan Robins. Both new members are farmer/producers on San Juan Island. Zee on poultry and market garden Sweet Earth Farm, and Dahl-Sesby on Heritage Farm, a poultry, beef and raw milk dairy producer.

Minutes

The minutes from the 06.07.06 ARC meeting were approved as written. Kathryn Quackenbush moved to accept the minutes; Ron Zee seconded the motion.

Guest Speaker: Local Agriculture and Economic Development

Jason Robertson of the consulting firm, Barney & Worth Inc., explained that his firm has been hired to write an economic development report and recommendations for the EDC and San Juan County. As part of this work, he is looking at the potential role of local agriculture in future economic development strategies and asked for comment on the ARC's priorities for agriculture.

Goldsmith: We are about to set our agenda based on the results of the Farmer Survey conducted last spring. These priorities include (1) creating a year-round farmers' market on San Juan Island; (2) a "Buy Local: branding campaign to educate the public about the importance of supporting local agriculture; (3) creating a long-term meat and produce storage facility in the county; (4) creating a mobile poultry processing unit similar to the existing meat processing unit; (5) supporting the development of milk and cheese dairies and production; (6) promoting viable farm-to-school cafeteria programs. Not only are these issues important to the farming community; they are also fundamental to the food security of San Juan County.

Robertson: I would like to get a copy of the survey findings. Is marketing an area county farmers need help with?

Goldsmith: Access to markets and marketing are issues we are looking at in conjunction with the Northwest Agricultural Business Center (NWABC). Tom Schultz will get a copy of the findings to you. However, some important issues were not captured in our survey. The public education element of a buy local campaign (which was strongly voiced in our 3 farmer "roundtable meetings" conducted around the survey) and the overall importance of agriculture to the local economy, including the rural landscape, tourism, food security, etc. Friends of the San Juans did a survey several years ago that brings out these more general points. Their study pointed out that farming requires fewer public services, and as an economic sector, costs taxpayers less to support than do the other segments of the local economy—primarily those requiring, or based on, new construction and other infrastructure development.

Robertson: The report and recommendations I am creating seek to identify a couple of areas where targeted investment would stimulate the local economy, such as improvements to the agricultural infrastructure: water, shipping, etc. For instance, would improvements in inter-island transportation help local farmers?

Goldsmith: The cost of ferry transport is beginning to be prohibitive. In the old days, farmers could put boxes of produce on the ferry without accompanying them, and have them picked up on the other side. This is no longer an option for farmers, although interestingly, the newspapers are still allowed to move their goods this way. Instead, farmers are finding creative ways to move our goods from island to island through the good will of other drive-on passengers. In general, freight haulers are too expensive.

Akopiantz: There are a few haulers, one on Waldron, Mike Flynn on Lopez. But I agree with Todd, many are making arrangements with regular ferry commuters, at least between the other islands and San Juan island.

Corning: Within individual islands, there are CSA's (community supported agriculture) that are working well: five on Orcas, and at least one each that I know of on Waldron and Lopez. San Juan Island has several strong CSA's including our farm (Synergy). Lacrover Farm on SJI has a regular customer base of 30 families. Synergy has 150 subscribers in the summer and about 12 in the winter. Also, some of us are using on-line ordering systems.

Moore: Blue Moon Farm on Waldron has 25 CSA's in summer, and 12-15 over the winter.

Goldsmith: A relatively small percentage of produce is sold on SJI from other islands, and according to our data, about 20% of farm families are supported by the produce from their farms, although we don't know if these families rely exclusively on their farm income. Most local farmers work off the farm to augment their income.

Corning: CSA's are not the magic bullet for farm economic viability. Rather, diversity of products and retail outlets is critical. We cannot depend on any one market strategy to form an effective economic development plan that will be good for local agriculture.

Robertson: I agree and that is why the ARC needs to put forth several strategies for consideration.

Goldsmith: All other counties have full time staff to address these agricultural issues. Not having this kind of resource support is an obstacle to realizing the potential economic benefit of agriculture in SJC.

Akopiantz: We farm full time without CSA but use a farm stand. In addition, our farm sells its produce at the Farmers' Market and to local restaurants. The big issues for us and other farmers on Lopez are: labor, the availability of farmland, good technical support, and in the future, water.

Dahl-Sesby: I want to add that increasing regulation and documentation is very problematic.

Robertson: These issues are on my list. Labor is one of the most difficult to address. Technical support can be addressed, and the agricultural staff support is a great idea. The county could address this. In Pierce County, we identified a number of regulatory processes that the county could adjust to make them manageable for farmers. I will be summarizing my comments on agriculture shortly, and will make a draft available to you. If you have anything to add that did not come up during this discussion, please send them to me via email.

Action: Tom Schultz will forward to Jason, a copy of the farm survey results. Jana Marks will forward to Jason a copy of the Friends of the San Juans survey.

Recent Activities

Dog Ordinance:

Goldsmith: There have been several County Council meetings on this subject. The ARC has had representatives at all of them: Kathryn Quackenbush, Jim Lawrence, Tom Schultz, Bruce Gregory and Sandy Strehlou attended.

Schultz: Most of the comments made by ARC members were supported by the Council. There were some issues from other community representatives with the compensation fund—namely why only livestock losses are eligible, not pets. The Council seems to support restrictions and raising the penalty fees (to \$1000), but not necessarily euthanasia as it was proposed by the ARC. Instead they favor using legal language that identifies “dangerous dogs” as a Class C felony for a second offence.

Goldsmith: Local livestock owners do not agree with an ordinance that would not euthanize any dog identified as a “dangerous dog.”

Schultz: The Council is meeting on this topic again tomorrow, but it looks like they are leaning toward a \$1000 fine going primarily into the compensation fund. They are also considering the establishment of an animal control officer position in the Sheriff’s office—there may be grant money available to fund it. They have agreed to re-establish the sign program outside of the ordinance.

Action: Quackenbush and Gregory will attend the Council meeting tomorrow. Goldsmith will draft a press release for distribution if/when the new ordinance is passed and the dog control signs go back up.

Administration

ARC Committee Chairperson Election:

Goldsmith: The election of the new ARC Chairperson was carried over from the last meeting. Ron Zee, San Juan County Conservation District Manager, has agreed to assume the duties of the position if elected.

Action: Goldsmith nominated Zee for ARC Chair. The vote was unanimous in favor of Zee.

ARC Subcommittees:

Goldsmith: We need to look at the existing ARC Subcommittee structure and assignments in light of recent committee member resignations and appointments, current issues, etc. Originally, each member volunteered to serve on two committees. With the current issues being discussed, it has been difficult to track who is taking responsibility for attending meetings and making reports.

Zee: ARC members should respond via email to Zee regarding this matter. There are a lot of important issues facing ARC and the local farming community; we won’t be able to represent the agricultural interests of our constituency unless we are well organized.

Action: Please call or send email to Ron indicating what subcommittees you have already volunteered for, and/or what subcommittees you would like to work with. The choices are: Natural Resources, Legal and Regulatory, Infrastructure, or Education and Outreach.

ARC Coordinator Recruitment:

Schultz: Due to the increased workload needs of the ARC, current ARC administrative coordinator, Sandy Strehlou, will be resigning in November. Funding for the expanded position is sufficient in the current ARC budget, however we will need to find new funding to continue the position through 2007 and beyond. The County Council is currently planning the 2007 budget, so he will be able to report on the possibility of requesting a funding request for support in the coming fiscal year.

Zee: Suggested the possibility of sending a formal letter to the County Council requesting support for a half-to full-time coordinator position. He is also willing to explore whether or not the CD could fund part of the expanded coordinator position. For the time being however, the ARC coordinator recruitment needs to proceed at the current funding level.

Action: It was moved and seconded by the members to authorize Schultz, Goldsmith and Zee to develop a 2007 ARC budget that includes funding the coordinator position at the half-or full time level, with benefits, while at the same time posting the current position through all relevant employment channels. The motion passed unanimously.

Committee Reports

Critical Areas Ordinance (CAO):

Zee: The Conservation District (CD) is monitoring the CAO process. In June the CD attended the County's public CAO meeting conducted by their consultants. Zee introduced Shireene Hale, the County's senior planner working on the CAO update. Documents from Hale and Zee concerning "farm planning" were distributed.

Hale: Although it is understood by all parties that SJC's CAO will not meet the December 2006 deadline, updating the CAO is mandated by the State of WA, so SJC must participate. Public meetings are being held next week on the three main islands. The draft proposal submitted by the consultants proposes a "standard conservation farm plan alternative" to the regulatory measures such as wetland buffers. We are looking for input from the farming community on the farm plan proposal. The proposed plan format was modeled after Island and Whatcom counties—Island's was accepted by the State.

Goldsmith: As Scott Meyers stated earlier during the Public Comment part of the meeting, there are two big issues for local farmers: time and money.

Additionally, local producers do not understand why the current policies are not acceptable.

Hale: The State has already indicated that the current language will not be acceptable. The specific problem areas will be identified during the community meetings. In the meantime, ARC members should send their comments on the draft documents to Shireene Hale [shireeneh@co.san-juan.wa.us] directly, as well as making sure to have ARC representatives at the meetings. Also, if individual farmers are not sure about the location of wetlands vis a vis their properties, she has maps showing the locations. However, even if your property is not in a wetland, it may still be determined to be a "critical area."

Goldsmith: The ARC's representatives to the CAO are Mark Tompkins and Rena Patty; hopefully both will be attending the upcoming meetings.

Schultz: Responding to the concerns voiced by several ARC members, Schultz recommended that the consultants run ads in all the local papers and through the on-line news websites alerting the public to the upcoming meetings.

Habegger: Recommended that SJC hire a specialist to work with farmers to create their plans, and that this resource person should be conversant in wetlands issues. Goldsmith concurred.

Goldsmith: Noted that what maps and data exists is not, in his experience, accurate.

Hale: Acknowledged that SJC does not have a GIS person yet, and that new, more accurate information, is needed. The current 2007 draft budget does not include funding for this position, so it is unlikely that there will be support next year.

Zee: Noted that Island County contracts with the Island County Conservation District for this support. For the time being, however, ARC members and other interested farms need to be a part of the current CAO process.

Goldsmith: Recommended that local rural farm forest producers be notified as well.

No-Net-Loss Agricultural Land Use Policy Resolution:

Zee: Distributed a draft resolution and asked the members to review it, comment, and if appropriate, move to adopt and forward to the County Council.

Gregory: Spoke with the SJI group saying it was acceptable to those present.

Schultz: Asked if the language describing "potential opposition by the ARC" might need to be more opened-ended.

Action: With the Schultz modification, Zee moved to accept the resolution; Goldsmith and Miller first and seconded the motion. It was approved unanimously.

WRIA:

Corning: Reported that water rights requests are now triggering inspection on Orcas. This will begin on Lopez next, to be followed by SJI. Additionally, it looks

as though a permitting process will be instituted for water catchment systems. SJC has to develop a local management plan for sewage and septic systems (gravity or pressure systems) that ties into the CAO. Although the enforcement process is not yet worked out, homeowner systems will eventually have requirements for regular inspections. With regard to wells, preliminary testing of wells has found nitrate in individual wells; this could pose a significant health risk, particularly for infants. On Lopez, they have found chloride when testing on Lopez. This could signal a health and conservation problem for aquifers on that island. Both the nitrate and chloride findings require further research to determine if there are levels significant enough to present a health, and/or environmental risk. If this is confirmed, one mitigation measure for chloride would be to install water meters on individual wells to promote water conservation and preserve healthy aquifer levels.

Farm Survey:

Miller: Distributed a draft press release summarizing the results of the ARC's Farm Survey.

Goldsmith: Read the draft into the record, and asked to include "preservation of farmland" as a priority, as it was not mentioned in the draft press release but did turn up as a significant concern both on the survey, as well as in the farm meetings held on Orcas, Lopez and SJI earlier this year.

Habegger: Suggested saying that the survey results will guide ARC's actions in the year ahead. She also recommended adding information about upcoming ARC meetings and locations.

Action: Sandy Strehlou is finishing up the producer database; as soon as it is completed, Miller will distribute the press release to local media groups, as well as sending a thank you letter to the local farming community thanking them for responding to the survey. The survey results will also be posted on the ARC website.

Other News, Reports & Announcements

No reports were made due to time limitations.

The next ARC meetings will be held on Monday, November 27, 2006, 12:00-2:00pm (WSU Extension Office, San Juan Island), and Monday, December 18, 2006 on Orcas Island (location to be announced.)